GRASPING FOR STRAWS
MARK 5:22-34
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BETHANY PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
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Sometimes it takes an interruption ~~by an unlikely person~~ unlikely to put things back into perspective. A year or so ago we were watching a football game on television on Monday night. And at a particularly tense moment a dog ran out on the field - and there in full view of the 50,000 people in the stands, and the millions more watching on television, did what dogs are inclined to do ~~when they run out on a field~~ under the circumstances. . . .

And then, to make matters worse, ran from end zone to end zone eluding the best efforts of the players to catch him. The healthy thing about that was that it put things back into perspective. Now I dearly love football, but, integrity occassionally forces me to admit that we take it altogether too seriously. It really is just a game - and its purpose is entertainment: and for a lot of people that little dog, barging into the solemn, serious and tense battlefield served to put things back in perspective: back where they belong.

A minister friend of mine one time was waxing eloquent from the pulpit, driving home a particularly serious bit of theology, when a three year old girl - an escapee from the Nursery - came bursting through the door behind him - ran across the chancel screaming for her mommy - on up the center aisle until familiar arms reached out to rescue her. When things settled down the preacher went on. But the interruption really had put things in perspective.

It is that kind of refreshing experience that happens in our text this morning. It's a strange, and in many ways - embarrasing, story. It's about an old woman whose name isn't even on the program: a woman who emerges anonymously from the crowd and fades away again to be heard from no more.

The main event has to do with Jesus and a man names Jarius, an important ruler of the Synagog whose young daughter was critically ill. He had followed Jesus and when he found him fell at his feet and begged him to come and make her well. Jesus agreed to go - and the crowd - which was already there, increased in size and certainly in excitement. And it is precisely at this rather dramatic moment that the interruption occurs. Later, the story of Jarius and his daughter will continue. But for now there is an unlikely and slightly embarrasing interruption. A woman came up behind him and grabbed his robe.

The first problem is with her illness: it wasn't exactly fashionable. She had been

hemorrhaging for twelve years, and the condition had gotten worse. It was a humiliating, debilitating social condition as well as a physical illness. We should not be bothered with that kind of thing any more.—And yet I regularly encounter people in the hospital too ashamed of their operation or sickness even to call it by name.

In any case this woman had a social as well as a physical problem. To make matters worse, her culture had defined it as a religious condition. In the law, this particular condition was defined as "uncleaness". Leviticus 5:2 - which every good Jew had read further defines uncleaness as contagious: "...if anyone touches an unclean thing - or if he touches human uncleaness...he shall be guilty." What that means is that this woman would have been treated like a leper: for 12 years a total and complete social outcast. No one wanted to be near her: normal human relationships were out of the question: the very best people didn't even want to see her.

And if it's possible to imagine her feeling worse yet we must. Because the same law that branded her as an outcast forced her to bear - alone - the responsibility for her condition. There is in the Bible a relationship between sin and physical illness. It's a thorny problem. And without discussing it in detail we can conclude that one of the results was that sick people were very likely guilty people. This woman in particular, with her condition - for 12 years an outcast - had to feel pretty rotten and pretty desparate.

But with all of that, the worst thing about her is her theology. She breaks every rule in the book. She gives no indication that she knew who Jesus was: she doesn't call him by any of the theologically or socially acceptable titles like Lord, Master, Teacher. She didn't come asking about the meaning of existence: she didn't come out of existential boredom. She didn't want to be a disciple, follower - she didn't even want to look him in the face. Stated very simply, she had heard the rumor that some carpenter from Nazareth was going around healing people. And out of her desparate twelve years she was willing to try anything. So she sneaked up behind him, hidden in the crowd, and when he wasn't looking reached out and grabbed his robe.

Now there is an interesting twist at this point that can be missed unless we read very carefully. The idea worked. She was cured and she knew it. Jesus knew it too. And

it's worst the cruelest of hoaxes.

I chose to belive that the story is there for a purpose: that the author telescoped it into another story precisely in order to make his point. I chose to believe that God's word is in this story for us to hear. Let's pursue it a bit.

At the center of Christian faith, Christian religion, Christian Discipleship, Christian Community is a Lord who is a personal savior: a Lord who deals with individuals - individual lives: a Lord who saves - that is to say, who heals, restores, changes the lives of individual people.

That's not news for a large percentage of Christian people. The evangelicals have always maintained the centrality of Jesus Christ as a personal savior. But, unfortunately evangelical Christianity - particularly in the United States -has stopped with personal salvation. Christ has been personal savior - but hardly a Lord who had much to do with society as a whole. Some evangelicals have found it possible to call Jesus Christ their savior in the context of a Ku Klux Klan rally: to maintain unjust, unfair, inhuman social structures without experiencing any conflict at all. Every year at this time I try to do my bit in United Fund soliciting. And while it is probably unfair I'm just agitated enough to state my conclusion that the more evangelical and fundamentalist the person, the less likely he is to be concerned about human need - real human need - in the world.

And so we've reacted - out of a deep commitment to a Christ who cared about things like justice and hunger. And I suppose - we've over-reacted at times. Or at least we've allowed people to interpret our Gospel totally in terms of social righteousness. We've allowed other groups a monopoly on the name "Jesus Christ" and I'm tired of it. I'm tired of our attempts to write statements of purpose that discuss enabling people to grow and become: that define in glowing terms the cultivation of a nurturing, loving Christian community, that talk about ministry in the world and leave out the only thing really necessary - the Lordship of Jesus Christ - who is, in fact, a personal savior.

Now, I want very badly to be understood. I believe that Christian faith that does not cause us to weep at injustice, that fails to bring us to our knees in confession when our government bombs the wrong village by mistake - is not Christian faith. I believe that Christianity that can ignore racism - that refuses to feel compassion for the poor - that

divorces itself from life and hides behind the cloak of personal piety is phony.

It's just that without a personal Lord, we really have nothing. The hopeful liberalism that assumes that society can be made right if people just get enough education and food and decent housing is bankrupt. And the same philosophy that defines the church solely in terms of an agent for social change is equally bankrupt. . . .

Salvation - without a savior is a dry thesis that ultimately is pretty boring. And a church that forgets a Lord who confronted individuals will soon become equally boring. Balance is the word. A balance that begins with an individual's encounter with Jesus Christ and then flows into a life of discipleship. That encounter - that deeply personal dialogue between a person and Jesus Christ is where it begins: it is what we are about.

Christianity is personal as well as corporate. Christ is Lord of the World: Lord of the Church: and Lord of individual men and women. His own life focused on individuals like the woman in the story. So we ought to be moved to reflect on our mission as a church and as individuals. Who are the counterparts to that desparate, lonely women? Who out there is crying to be known and loved and cared for? People in legal trouble - poor people caught in a judicial system that reserves its best justice for those who can afford reputable attorneys. To be poor and black and in jail is to be alone in a special way. And so in the name of Jesus Christ who was notorious in singling out these kinds of people for individual attention our Church gets involved. And you are invited to participate in the Offering for Love and Justice.

Who is lonely and alienated and afraid and ashamed - like the woman in the story? Visit a home for the aged some time. See how our very best intentions end up robbing people of their individuality by calling them "honey" instead of using their names. See how they sit in utter aloneness waiting for the Doctor who is too busy to call; waiting for anybody to say they matter.

Jesus gave people new life by taking them seriously as individuals: and in his name - for his sake - that saving ministry is ours. Jesus walked right into the grubby lives of people no one else was even noticing. He didn't tie any strings to his saving love: he didn't insist that they obey the rules or learn the right words. He identified with them wherever they were. "No wilderness is too desolate for Christ" is the way one man

puts it.

Now ordinarily - the theology of Christ's presence is usually attached to an appeal to go out into the world and serve him. But this time - for once - let's get ourselves into the picture. Let's see ourselves in that nameless woman who came to him out of desparate need.

Let's see our needs in her condition: our anxieties about our marriages, our families, our jobs, our future: let's see our sometimes quiet desparation as part of the story: and let's be open to the Good News that it is precisely at the point of our need that Jesus Christ is available. A lot of people probably touched him in that jostling crowd. The one that got his attention - the one that was set free and told to go in peace - was the one woman who needed him - who wasn't afraid to admit it - and who had the childish audacity or courage - or faith - to reach out and grab his robe.

That's the only thing required: we have to take the same risk she did: we have to become vulnerable by making that difficult admission that "I am in need - I hurt - I'm lonely - I'm afraid - I'm ashamed."

The promise that many of us have never gotten around to trying - is that he is there - available - ready to help and heal.

One unlikely woman tried it. She reached out and grabbed his robe. And he said "Your faith has made you well. Go in peace". AMEN

Father, we've been taught all our lives to be self-sufficient: to need nothing. And so we stand in the crowd as a savior walks by. Give us the courage to reach out and grab his robe. AMEN